

Risiera Today

"**Risiera di San Sabba**" is a former rice-husking facility that was built in 1913. After September 8, 1943, the Nazi occupation forces used the premises as prison camp, headquarters where deported prisoners were sorted out to be sent to Germany and Poland, raided goods depot, prison and extermination camp for hostages, partisans, political and Jewish prisoners. On April 4, 1944 a crematory plant was installed and made operative. In 1965, a decree issued by the President of the Republic raised the "Risiera di San Sabba" to the status of National Monument. As of 1975, following restructuring interventions according to architect Romano Boico's plan, the premises house the "Civico Museo della Risiera di San Sabba".

Where: Ratto della Pileria 43 - tel. 040 826202. - fax 040 825673

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When: daily 9 -19;

Closing dates: January 1, December 25.

How much: free entrance.

How: bus lines n. 8, 10, 19, 20, 21, 23;

Private means: SS. 202 exit "Valmaura/Stadio/Cimitero";

The Risiera

The large complex of buildings making up the rice-husking factory - constructed in 1913 in San Sabba on the outskirts of Trieste - was first used by the German forces of occupation as a temporary prison camp for the detention of Italian servicemen captured after 8th September 1943. It was designated Stalag 339. In late October it was converted into a Polizeihaf Lager (Police internment camp) to be used for the transit of deportees bound for Germany and Poland, for the storage of confiscated property and for the internment and execution of hostages, partisans, political prisoners and Jews.

In the underground entry passage the first room on the left was known as the "death cell". In it were kept internees transported from prisons or captured in round-ups and earmarked for execution and cremation within a few hours. According to eye-witness accounts new arrivals in the cell often found themselves in the company of bodies awaiting cremation.

On the left side of the ground floor of the three-storey building housing the dressmaking and shoe-making shops where prisoners worked and quarters for the SS officers and other ranks, were 17 mini-cells used for the detention of up to six inmates each. These were set aside mainly for partisans, political prisoners and Jews scheduled for execution in the space of a few days, or sometimes weeks. The first two cells were used for torture or the collection of property confiscated from the prisoners. The articles found there included thousands of identity papers taken from prisoners, deportees and individuals sent for forced labour. (All the papers, collected by the Yugoslav troops who were the first to enter the Risiera after the Germans fled, were transferred to Ljubljana, where they are at present kept in the Archive of the Slovenian Republic).

The doors and walls of these ante-chambers of death were covered with graffiti. The occupation of the site by Allied troops, its subsequent conversion into a camp for Italian and non-Italian refugees, damp, dust and - above all - human neglect led to the disappearance of most of the graffiti. The diaries of the scholar and collector, Diego de Henriquez (which are now conserved in the Civic Museum of War and Peace that bears his name) provide evidence of this and contain an accurate transcription. Several pages of this diary are reproduced in the historical exhibition.

The next building, four storeys high, was made up of large rooms used for the detention of Jews, other civilian prisoners and prisoners-of-war destined for the most part to be deported to Germany - men and women of all ages, children and babies of just a few months. From here they were transported to Dachau, Auschwitz and Mauthausen. Only a few were able to avoid the tragic fate that awaited them.

The Bishop of Trieste, Monsignor Santin, attempted to intercede with the German authorities on behalf of certain individuals imprisoned in the Risiera - particularly Jews who were married to Catholics. In some cases he was successful (Giani Stuparich and his family were released), in others (Pia Rimini) he was not.

In the inner courtyard, opposite the cells, on the site now marked by a metal plate, was the building housing the oven in which bodies were cremated - its outline is still visible on the main building. The oven, built below ground level, was reached by means of a stair. An underground passage, now also marked by the metal plate, joined the oven to the chimney stack. The base of the chimney is now the metal base of a symbolic Pietà composed of three metal sheets representing the smoke spiralling out of the stack.

After using the existing rice-drying facility from January to March 1944 the Germans converted it into a crematorium capable of incinerating a larger number of bodies. The plan was drawn up by the "expert" Erwin Lambert, who had already designed a number of ovens for concentration camps in Poland. It was tested out on 4th April 1944 with the cremation of the bodies of seventy hostages, shot the day before at the Opicina shooting range.

On the night of 29th April 1945 the building housing the crematorium and the chimney stack connected to it were dynamited by the fleeing Germans to remove the evidence of their crimes, as was their practice. Human bones and ashes were found among the rubble in three paper sacks of the sort used for cement. The club was also found amid the rubble and a replica of this object, made and donated by Giuseppe Novelli in 2000, is now on display in the Museum (the original was stolen in 1981).

There are several theories about the methods of execution used, and all of them are probably right: gassing in specially-equipped vehicles, a blow with a club at the base of the skull, shooting. A single blow from a club was not always fatal, so some of the people swallowed by the oven must have been alive. The revving of engines, the baying of deliberately-excited dogs and the playing of music served to smother the screams and the noises of the executions. The central building, six storeys high, was used as a barracks: on the upper floors were quarters for German, Austrian, Ukrainian and Italian SS troops (the Italians were employed as guards), while the lower floor, now the Museum, housed the kitchens and mess. The building which is now a chapel for all religions was used as a garage for the SS vehicles stationed there. It also contained the black vans, with exhausts connected to the inside, probably used for gassing some of the inmates.

The small building outside the complex on the left was the guardhouse and Commandant's quarters. On the right, in what is now a green area, was a three-storey building with offices, NCOs' quarters and accommodation for the Ukrainian women.

How many people were done to death in the Risiera? Estimates based on eye-witness accounts range from three to five thousand. But a much greater number of prisoners or people taken in roundups passed through there for transportation to other concentration camps or forced labour camps. Triestini, Friulani, Istrians, Slovenes, Croats, servicemen, Jews - some of the finest cadres of the Resistance and the anti-Fascist movement burned in the Risiera.

The Litorale Adriatico

After 8th September 1943, when the Italian king disavowed his country's alliance with Germany and an armistice was proclaimed, the Region of Venezia Giulia was no longer part of the Italian State. With the constitution of the operational zone called "Adriatisches Küstenland" (Adriatic Coastal Area - Litorale Adriatico) it came under the direct administration of the Reich. The institution of the "Litorale Adriatico", comprising the provinces of Udine, Trieste, Gorizia, Pola (now Pula), Fiume (Rijeka) and Lubiana (Ljubljana), thus marked the de facto annexation to Germany of a broad area straddling the Upper Adriatic and the Sava basin.

Hitler entrusted the government of the "Litorale" to Gauleiter of Carinthia Friedrich Rainer, an Austrian Nazi with an intense dislike for Italy. His ethnic assessment of Friuli and Venezia Giulia was that these two Regions were largely alien to the Italian race, which constituted an additional justification for their separation from the rest of Italy.

On 1st October 1943 High Commissioner Rainer took office with full political and administrative

powers. He quickly established the nerve centres of his almost unlimited sovereignty by subjecting prefects and local authorities to the supervision of German "advisers" and laying down rules for the employment of militias composed of local collaborators - Italian, Slovene and Croat - which, for various purposes and under various names, were placed in the service of the occupying power. The units of the Fascist Militia thus came under the aegis of the SS. They did not, as was the case in the newly-constituted Republic of Salò, become the National Republican Guard, but took the name Territorial Defence Militia. The various branches of the police, all of which were used in searches and round-ups, also came under the SS.

One of these was the Special Inspectorate of the Venezia Giulia State Police, headed by Inspector General Giuseppe Gueli, whose headquarters were in a house known as "Villa Triste" (Sad Villa) on via Bellosguardo. This body was founded in April 1942 with the specific task of repressing partisan operations and controlling workers in large factories. The Inspectorate - whose operational section became notorious as the "Collotti Band" (after its head, Commissioner Gaetano Collotti) - continued service after 8th September, giving invaluable collaboration to the Germans in operations against anti-Fascists and in rounding up Jews.

In the late 1930s there were about 5,000 Jews in Trieste. In 1938, when the Fascists introduced race legislation and one of the notorious "Centres for the Study of the Jewish Question" was opened in Trieste (there were four in Italy), many Jews decided to leave the country. Nonetheless, the Nazis managed to deport more than 700 Trieste Jews to extermination camps. No more than twenty returned. The Risiera was also used for the detention, pending deportation, of many more Jews captured in Veneto, Friuli, Fiume and Dalmatia.

Policing, political and racist repression and anti-partisan operations were under the general control of the SS, commanded by Trieste-born Odilo Lotario Globocnik. An associate of Heinrich Himmler, Globocnik had been involved in organising "Aktion Reinhard", the massacre of two and a half million Jews in Poland. With him he brought to Trieste a large number of experienced killers who had distinguished records from various extermination operations in Germany, the Soviet Union and the Polish death camps at Belzec, Sobibor and Treblinka. They included the 92 specialists of Einsatzkommando Reinhard, many of whom were Ukrainian SS troops, male and female.

Einsatzgruppen or Einsatzkommandos were special units created for the purpose of "dealing with elements hostile to the Reich behind the front-line troops" and carrying out particularly "demanding" tasks in the implementation of the policies of occupation, repression and extermination practised by the Third Reich in the territories it had conquered. These units were under the authority of the Central State Security Office (Reichssicherheitshauptamt - RSHA) which in turn was controlled by the Ministry of the Interior, headed by Reichsführer SS Heinrich Himmler.

A few days after 8th September 1943 Christian Wirth arrived in Trieste. With him were some of the men who had taken part in "Aktion Tiergarten 4" - the liquidation, started in 1939, of Germans suffering from "incurable diseases" and, subsequently, of concentration camp inmates designated as "incurable" on bogus certificates made out by camp doctors. Einsatzkommando Reinhard was divided into three geographical areas, the headquarters for each of which was officially denoted with a variation of the letter R - R1 for Trieste, R2 for Udine and R3 for Fiume. This letter was embossed on papers found in the Risiera and was stamped on the cells there.

Christian Wirth was in charge of the first Einsatzkommando in Trieste. After his death in a partisan ambush at Erpelle on 26th May 1944 he was replaced by August Dietrich Allers. Allers' righthand man and Commandant of the Risiera was Joseph Oberhauser. The presence in the Litorale Adriatico of a staff so highly specialised in the direction and organisation of extermination policies in Europe is explained by the vital importance of the area for the Third Reich.

The Litorale was the last territory in Europe to be conquered by Nazi imperialism. Friuli, Trieste and Istria were to be an economic and political platform for German expansion in southern Europe and the Mediterranean area. At the same time they constituted an essential strategic fulcrum between the Balkans, convulsed by the partisan war and threatened by the advance of the Red Army, the Italian front and southern Germany. The course of the war in Europe and the heroic fight put up by the peoples living side by side in the area finally forced the machine of Nazi repression to abandon its last territorial conquest.

The Trial

In Trieste in April 1976, thirty years after the events outlined above, the trial was completed of those responsible for the crimes committed at the Risiera di San Sabba under the German occupation. Among the accused were two Nazis - Joseph Oberhauser, a brewer from Munich, and August Dietrich Allers, a lawyer from Hamburg. The former was Commandant of the Risiera, the latter his immediate superior during the period of "Aktion Tiergarten 4", the "euthanasia" operation carried out on mentally and physically handicapped people in Germany and Austria. By the time this operation was suspended following the courageous protests raised by German churchmen, approximately 100,000 "unproductive mouths" had been liquidated in the name of "racial hygiene" (these figures were cited at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trials). The Tiergarten 4 staff was subsequently transferred to Poland, where it organised the extermination camps at Treblinka, Sobibor and Belzec as part of the "final solution" to the Jewish question.

Official Polish estimates - and they are the most conservative - put the number of Jews killed in these camps at about two and half million and the number of gypsies at 52,000 (of which about a third were children). When their work in Poland was completed these men were sent to Italy and stationed in Trieste. Among them was Franz Stangl, the "Hangman of Treblinka", held responsible by a German court for the death of 900,000 people, and Erwin Lambert, the specialist in crematorium design.

None of the defendants was present at the trial held to establish responsibility for the crimes perpetrated at the Risiera di San Sabba. Several had been executed by partisans, others had died of natural causes. August Dietrich Allers died in March 1975; Joseph Oberhauser continued to sell beer in Munich. The Italian authorities did not request his extradition since the Italo-German extradition treaty does not cover crimes committed before 1948. The trial ended with Joseph Oberhauser being sentenced to life imprisonment for his crimes. He died on 22nd November 1979 at the age of 65.

A pointless trial? Aside from the original framework of the proceedings, based on a preposterous distinction between "innocent victims" and "non-innocent victims", aside from a formalism designed to dissociate the crimes from their historical and political roots and aside from a sentence which was never served, there remains the breach that was finally made in the cloak of silence that had covered the concentration camp of San Sabba for over thirty years.

Simon Wiesenthal, a Jew who has devoted his life to exposing Nazi crimes and hunting down their perpetrators, said of the trial, "There is not only a need for justice, it is also a question of education. Everybody should know that crimes like these do not disappear from memory, they are not statute-barred. Anybody thinking of starting up a new Nazi or Fascist movement should know that in the end justice will always win. Even though the wheels of justice turn slowly".

The Monument

Romano Boico, the architect who won the competition organised by Trieste City Council in 1966 to convert the Risiera into a museum (opened in 1975), explained his plans as follows: "The Risiera, half destroyed by the fleeing Nazis, was squalid, like its surroundings. I thought that this total squalor could rise as a symbol and itself become a monument. I decided to remove and restore rather than add. After removing the ruined buildings I demarcated the context with 11-metre high concrete walls arranged so as to form a disquieting entrance on the same spot as the existing entrance. The walled courtyard is intended as an open-air non-denominational basilica. The building where prisoners were kept was completely emptied and the load-bearing wooden structures pared down as much as seemed necessary. The seventeen cells and the death cell are unchanged. In the central building, level with the courtyard, is the Museum of the Resistance, minimal but alive. Above the Museum, the rooms of the Deportees' Association. In the courtyard is a terrible path of steel, slightly sunken - the trace of the oven, the smoke channel and the base of the chimney."

The Museum

Through documents and other exhibits, the San Sabba Risiera Civic Museum (inaugurated in 1975) and the adjacent photographic-documentary exhibition (prepared by the curator Elio Apih in 1982 and expanded in 1998) illustrate the history of the Risiera, and reconstruct the historical, political and military events of the entire region during the first half of the 20th Century. Thanks to several important donations made on 27th January 2002, the Day of Remembrance, the Museum has changed its original didactic connotation in order to become a site for the conservation of memory, a place where the visitor comes into direct, tangible contact with human suffering and tragedy.

In the Hall of Crosses, display cases set in the walls contain personal objects stolen from Triestine Jews by Nazi troops who were intending to flee with them to Carinzia in 1945. These objects were found by the Allies stashed in burlap bags and were sent to Rome, where for decades they lay forgotten in the underground vaults of the Treasury Ministry. In 2000, they were finally restored to the Jewish Community of Trieste, which decided to display a portion of them in the Carlo and Vera Wagner Museum, and donate another small but significant selection to the Civic Museum of the San Sabba Risiera and to the "Yad Vashem" Museum in Jerusalem.

The items include watches, eyeglasses, combs, a ring, a compact, a pin, a cigarette-holder and some silverware, all simple personal objects the very 'normality' of which makes the drama of so many lives tragically crushed and interrupted in their equally 'normal' flow appear even more tangible and intolerable.

The Museum also contains donations by the local section of the National Association of former Political Deportees to Nazi Camps (ANED) and by some of its members of Trieste who were deported to Auschwitz, Buchenwald, Dachau, Mauthausen and Ravensbrück (Riccardo Goruppi, Jolanda Marchesich, Antonio Marega through his heirs, Rosalia Poropat and Ferdinando Zidar). These objects confirm a special characteristic of the San Sabba Risiera which, while also a death camp where 3000-5000 people were killed, was primarily a transit camp. In fact, of the 123 convoys which left Italy bound for the death camps, 69 departed from Trieste. To these should be added another 30 convoys bound for the labour camps.

Displayed next to an urn containing ashes from the crematory ovens at Auschwitz (donated by the ANED) are personal objects preserved and offered in undying memory by deportees of Trieste.

Here we find a uniform worn by a deportee to Auschwitz and Mauthausen and one worn by a deportee to Buchenwald, maps and documents taken from the SS at Buchenwald, passes, identification documents, photographs, documents printed after the Liberation, drawings and maps of the camps and burial places. The will never to forget the immeasurable tragedy of the Nazi extermination or its victims is especially evident in the long paper roll upon which a deportee at Ravensbrück wrote the names and addresses of her companions, and which she succeeded in bringing back into Italy, concealing it for months under her uniform.

Alongside these precious relicts are the reproductions (in order to conserve the originals) of a number of graphics by Anton Zoran Music, which were donated by the artist in 1997.

Various ceremonies also testify to the enduring, vital link between the San Sabba Risiera and the local and international Jewish communities. These include the ceremony which preceded the burial in the Jewish Cemetery of Trieste of prostheses stripped from the bodies of Jews who perished in the Nazi concentration camps (18th June 1999), the transfer to the "Yad Vashem" Museum of Jerusalem of a box containing earth from the San Sabba Risiera and a stone taken from the wall of the building where Jews were segregated before being sent to the Nazi camps (27th January 2002) and the deposition of a small flask containing earth from Jerusalem, donated by the Keren Hayeson Foundation of Italy, and consigned by Diamantina Salonicchio, a former deportee to Bergen Belsen (27th January 2003).

In recent years, the Risiera, with over 100,000 visitors annually from all over the world, has become increasingly recognised as a place for knowledge and reflection. In addition to its didactic services the San Sabba Risiera also hosts exhibitions, commemorations (in particular, those connected with the Day of Remembrance and the Liberation), performances, concerts and scholarly conferences and presentations. In 2001 and 2002, it was used as the office of Italian Study Camp 3.3, of the International Civil Service. Since 2003, the adjacent building (entrance on Via

Rio Primario 1) houses the main offices of ANED - Trieste section and of the International Committee of the Nazi Lager of Risiera di San Sabba, Trieste.

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DECREE OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC 15th April 1965, No. 510

Declaration of the Risiera di San Sabba, Trieste, a National Monument.

THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC

In accordance with Law No.1089 of 1st June 1939 regarding the protection of items of artistic or historical interest;

In accordance with Royal Decree No. 363 of 30th January 1913 approving the rules for the implementation of laws regarding antiquities and fine arts;

Considering that the Risiera di San Sabba, Trieste - the only example of a Nazi concentration camp in Italy - should be con-served and entrusted to the Italian nation by virtue of its great historical and political interest;

At the proposal of the Secretary of State for Education;
Decreets

That the Risiera di San Sabba is hereby declared a National Monument.

This Decree, with the Seal of State affixed, shall be entered in the Official Body of laws and decrees of the Italian Republic. Anybody having to do with it is obliged to abide by it and see

that it is abided by.

Rome, 15th April 1965 (signed)

SARAGAT

(signed) the Minister of Justice: REALE

Registered at the State Audit Court, 26th day of May, 1965

Government records, Register No. 193, page 109. - (Signed) VILLA